



Theater: "A Doll's House Part 2" Part 2



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A DOLL'S HOUSE, PART 2 *** out of ****

GOLDEN THEATRE

Suddenly, it's a fair fight.

Lucas Hnath's Tony-winning play had an original cast bursting with talent (Condola Rashad, Jayne Houdyshell, Chris Cooper) when it opened earlier this year and was rightly lauded with praise. (You can read my original rave [here](#).) But it was dominated in brilliant fashion by a take-no-prisoners performance from Laurie Metcalf. (She deservedly won Best Actress.) Conceived in a way as a boxing match, *A Doll's House, Part 2* features one-on-one sparring between Nora and her husband Torvald, her daughter Emmy and her servant Anne Marie in quick, jarring scenes that are funny and fierce in equal measure. Metcalf took some blows but she always gave back twice as hard.



PHOTO BY JULIETA CERVANTES

Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson in “A Doll’s House, Part 2”

Now with three of the four roles featuring new performers, you’re suddenly not sure who’s going to win or how badly the losers will feel. Julie White is — perhaps surprisingly — more vulnerable than Metcalf. (I expected her to double down on the humor, but she pulls a little rope-a-dope on us; you’re not quite sure she’ll bounce back after every round.) Erin Wilhelmi chooses a less razor sharp and yet more poignant angle on the daughter that Nora left behind. (I never worried for Rashad’s character but this Emmy might indeed have her life ruined by Nora’s actions. Again.) And the great Stephen McKinley Henderson — always so likable even when being a scoundrel — makes you wonder why Nora left him at all.

In short, a second visit to *A Doll’s House, Part 2* confirms this is a major play that can and will be staged again and again, finding new insights with new cast members and new approaches to the material. Anyone who saw the original cast should jump at the chance to see it again and appreciate how this version plays a little more seriously (much like the world premiere reportedly did in California), yet still with plenty of laughs. And if you haven’t seen it, this fine cast will surely only get better.

Hnath’s play is of course a sequel to the world-shaking Ibsen play about a woman who rejects her particular marriage and — more shockingly — marriage in general as a bad deal for her gender. The heroine Nora walks out on her husband not because he’s cruel or mean or petty or abusive but simply because she wants to and needs to do it. She must have her independence because that’s more precious than protection from the rigors of the world. If that means abandoning her children, so be it. Men leave their wives all the time and no one

calls them monsters, she thinks! Nora slams the door on domesticity at the end of the original and the noise of it still echoes today.

Rather drolly, the sequel begins with a knock at that same door. Nora is asking to come back in. Not for refuge, but for a favor. She's clearly prospered in the 15 years since she left and rather eager to let someone — even just her one-time servant Anne Marie — know how well she's done. (Nora has become a radical proselytizer for the rights of women and denounces marriage, which she confidently expects to vanish as an institution in twenty years, thirty at the most.) But Nora isn't there for niceties.

To her shock, Nora has discovered that Torvald never divorced her as she expected him to do. This is no technicality: if they're still married, she has broken the law and can be jailed for signing contracts, taking lovers and otherwise behaving as a single woman. Plus, everything she's earned belongs to him. And if it gets out that this famous advocate for women's emancipation is actually still married, at the very least it will humiliate her.

But Nora's future isn't the only issue at stake. She's put the servant Anne Marie in a terrible position, asking for help when that woman has already sacrificed her life to raise Nora's children and depends wholly on Torvald for support in her old age. Nora's daughter has her own depressing reasons for wanting Nora's reappearance to end quickly. And Torvald will be ruined as a banker and member of the community if the scandal of Nora's return after so many years reawakens the scandal of her leaving.

Usually, one has to wait years to see a terrific play reimaged by a new group of actors. Replacement casts typically must follow the choices that made the show such a success and warranted bringing in a new cast in the first place. That's clearly not the case here, with director Sam Gold, the producers and of course Hnath clearly giving these actors free rein to explore the piece and find their own way into it.

Tony winner Julie White shows a little more uncertainty as Nora. God knows she can be as funny as anyone; here it's all the more striking when she isn't. And Henderson is a far more formidable foe. Cooper was good, finding his way on the stage where that terrific film actor is less confident. In fact, his stolid, stiff demeanor at the beginning may have worked to the show's advantage since we could see how frustrating living with this emotionally reserved man might be.

Henderson throws all the calculation out of whack — enjoyable so — the moment he shows up. His Torvald is so engaging and present and ready to argue his case, you keep thinking more and more that he might have a point. That gives added emotional resonance to their scenes together and his final quiet gesture at the end. The door closes again, as it must. But this time — thanks to Henderson — we're not just thinking of Nora. We're also thinking of the person she left behind.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O’Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll’s House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

The Whirligig * 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau **

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 ***

The Boy Who Danced On Air ** 1/2

The Government Inspector ** 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) ***

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.